

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 8, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent."

- Mark 6:12

Our whole Gospel lesson, Jesus at Nazareth and the sending out of the twelve, revolves around unbelief and belief, the lack of faith and having faith. In Nazareth Jesus *"could do no deed of power"* because of their unbelief. Then Jesus sends out the twelve to proclaim that everyone should repent. But what does repentance have to do with belief, what does it have to do with faith? Everything.

At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, Saint Mark tells us that His message was this, *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

For us Lutherans that's an important passage. It stands behind the very first of Luther's Ninety-five Theses. Luther began the Reformation questioning the doctrine of penance, questioning how the Western Church taught repentance. He wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, said "Repent," He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

The Church at the time taught that repentance had three parts - contrition (sorrow over your sin), confession (naming your sin to the priest), and satisfaction (doing something to make amends). It's a little like saying, when you somehow wrong your spouse you admit you were wrong, and buy flowers; but you're only really forgiven because you spent a lot of money on a nice bouquet - proving how sincere you are. Now, it's not illogical or wrong to say that if you've stolen something you should return it, the problem is there are obviously sins

that can never be amended (you can't un-cheat on your spouse no matter how many good works you do).

The problems with the Roman approach, even if it's logical, is that it makes forgiveness contingent on human beings. Are you really contrite? Does the priest think you're really, actually sorry? Did you verbally confess it? And did you really mean it, like, really, really mean it, this time? Did you make satisfaction for it? Did you try to make amends? Did you try hard enough? Of course, you can't un-cheat on your spouse, or un-kill someone, but...you could donate a lot of money to the Church...to building a new Cathedral, to Father So-and-So's retirement fund.

Luther and the Reformers realized that none of this depends on Christ; nowhere in this system is there room for faith in Christ alone. So Luther and the Reformers went back to the Scriptures to discover what the Scriptures said about repentance. What they found shifted the whole paradigm.

The root of the problem they discovered was not the process of repentance. It was the Church's understanding of sin. Sin was taught to be little more than doing wrong things. But in the Scriptures sin is unbelief. It's a matter not of doing or not doing, but of lack of faith.

It was not merely that Adam and Eve ate the fruit that caused the fall. It's that they trusted the serpent, and didn't trust God; the fruit of their unbelief was eating the forbidden fruit. Again and again in the Scriptures this is what we see. Lack of faith, unbelief, leads to sin.

And the consequence of unbelief is what is on display when the Lord returns home to Nazareth. Here among the people who we would think know Him best, we find the hardest of hearts. They have heard the stories from Capernaum and elsewhere in Galilee, that the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the mute speak, the demons are cast out and put to flight, and they don't believe any of it. Why? Because they think they know who Jesus is because He's grown up among

them. As far as they are concerned He's just the carpenter, the son of Joseph and Mary. And it's probably still whispered in the wings about the irregularity of His birth. Surely God would not call as a prophet one conceived out of wedlock? Surely God would not call a carpenter to be a prophet? But there's another level to their unbelief. They believe they get to stand in judgment over Jesus. He is beholden to them. He owes it to them.

And this gets the to the nature of unbelief. It puts us at the center not God. There's is not the childlike trust, the childlike faith, that puts God at the center and waits for Him. They expect Jesus to wait on them, to meet their every demand. They are at the center. And they have already decided in their hearts that even so, none of this can really be true because they "know" Him, and so He will have to prove to them that He is more than they know him to be.

So when Jesus shows up they demand that He do all the miracles He has done elsewhere. But He can't. Not because He won't, but because they don't believe. Saint Mark gives us this curious statement, *"And He could do no deed of power there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and cured them."* Notice that! Even in their hardness of heart He heals a few sick people, and they don't see it as anything. It's not a deed of power to them. There is nothing He could do that would prove to them what they don't want to believe.

Contrast that with the sending of the twelve. They are sent to proclaim repentance, that is to proclaim the same message Jesus began His ministry with, *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* And people do. They repent and they believe the good news and what follows is that sins are forgiven, demons are cast out, those anointed with oil are cured. So what's going on?

The key here is faith, belief. At it's heart the call to repentance is the call to faith. Let's go back to Luther. Luther and the Reformers realized that what the Church had gotten wrong was that sin is not a matter of checking off the list of good deeds done and bad deeds avoided. Sin is unbelief, and repentance is turning

from sin to God. That requires faith. Faith that God is waiting to receive you. Faith that you will be forgiven. Faith that your faithlessness will not be held against you when you turn to God.

Sin is not just a mistake, and thus repentance is not just saying you're sorry. Sin is unbelief, repentance is turning from unbelief to belief. Repentance is grabbing hold of the Gospel - the Good news and trusting it to be true. True for a sinner like you.

When the disciples proclaim repentance the heart of that proclamation is not, what dirty rotten sinners you are, you should be afraid; nor is it you should be sorry, now prove that you are sorry; it's not even, you've been living the wrong way so get your life in order! No, the heart of the proclamation of repentance is, *the kingdom of God has come near!* It has come near to you. It has come to you. The kingdom of God has come to sinners, sinners like you, sinners who include you. It has come to the very people who find it hard, even impossible to trust God, yet God is here, for you. His kingdom is here, for you. You don't have to search for it. You don't have to first make amends with God to be welcomed into it. It's already here, for you.

To repent is nothing less than to grab hold of that good news and to believe it. This is what Luther and the Reformers are saying when they define repentance like this in the Augsburg Confession, "*true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ).*"

Let's walk through that. True repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin. It's to look at your sin and realize just how far it's taken you from God. It's to look at your sin and not just to be afraid of hell and damnation and all that, it's to be afraid of sin. It's what happens when you look at your self, and your sin, and you realize "holy cow! I can't not do this! I

will never be perfect, I will never be worthy, I will never overcome this." It's to recoil in shock at the truth of how deep, dark, and dank your sin-filled self is.

But notice what comes next. It's not what we think should logically come next. We think what should come next is, so then do the opposite. Stop sinning, put your lying, cheating, stealing, anger, loathing, apathy, and lust, away from you and start doing good things. But that's not what the Reformers say, "*true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ).*" In other words, when you see the truth of the dark dank depths of your sin-filled heart and mind, believe the Gospel and the absolution.

When your sin scares you, when it overwhelms you, when you realize you're trapped, believe in the Good News, the kingdom of God is at hand in Jesus Christ who has been crucified for you. For already, before you ever examined yourself, or struggled with your sin, or wanted to be better, or tried so hard to do better, already Jesus Christ took your sin and made it His own and bore it in His own flesh on the cross, and overcame it with the fire of the love of God, and he buried the ashes of your sin in His own grave, and now He is risen. He is risen to bring you the forgiveness and healing you need.

And none of that is dependent on you getting your life together first. None of it is dependent on your being truly, perfectly, utterly, completely sincere (adjectives are the enemy of faith and the Gospel!) No, what does Jesus say to do? Repent and believe the Good News. Turn to Jesus and trust Him that Your sin is forgiven and overcome in Him.

And as you do remember this, the same God who spoke Creation into existence, is the God who says, "*The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" What I mean is, just as He created everything He commanded in the beginning simply by speaking, so He creates for you the very faith the Gospel

requires right there in your heart. None of this is dependent on you. The whole of it depends on Jesus - and that's good news for sinners like you and me!

Still, you say, but don't I need to get my life in order? Don't I need to make amends? Here's what Luther and the Reformers would say, after faith, "believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, comforts the conscience, and delivers from terror. Then good works, which are the fruits of repentance, are bound to follow."

The natural fruit of turning to Jesus and trusting Him, trusting that you are forgiven for His sake is... amendment of life, good works, all of that. But they aren't conditions to be met, they are fruits that grow out of repentance. Perhaps that happens in an instant, perhaps it will take a lifetime. We're not called to judge the validity of someone else's repentance based on how long it takes the fruit to mature. We are called to trust Jesus that in our own lives the fruit of repentance will grow and mature no matter how long it takes, because Jesus has promised it will, and it is Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, who heals you, who makes you holy, and brings forth the fruits of repentance by the power of His Word and His Sacraments.

As Christians, repentance is the whole of life, because every day we sin, and every day Jesus calls to you and me, "*The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news,*" repent and believe that He has been crucified just for you. Amen.